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Book Reviews

Nicholas Birns. *Theory After Theory: An Intellectual History of Literary Theory from 1950 to the Early 21st Century*. Peterborough: Broadview, 2010. Pp. 345. \$24.45 CAD.

Nicholas Birns' *Theory After Theory* takes seriously the question of what follows in the wake of theory's wane. This is not at all an elegy for theory, however. The book goes to great lengths to showcase theory as a creative, interdisciplinary matrix that has enabled a range of discursive formations to come on the scene. Roland Barthes' notion of the text as a "multi-dimensional space" telegraphs theory's *jouissance* (Birns 38), its meaning-generating agency and interactivity. Still, amidst a slew of post-1950s theorists and thinkers Birns is careful to home in on five titans of theory: Barthes, Harold Bloom, Wayne C. Booth, Michel Foucault, and Jacques Derrida. Of these, Foucault stands out as a hero, a tireless builder of bridges between the sciences and the humanities. Among the moments of discovery peppered throughout the book we learn that the Library of Congress classification for *The Order of Things*, his zeitgeist-altering study, situates it in a bibliographical and encyclopedic, rather than interpretive, category. For Birns, this demonstrates the amphibious nature of Foucault's critique of epistemes. Foucault's category-defying epistemology represents theory at its best precisely because it empowers us to transcend it.

That Birns manoeuvres with ease among none-too-tidy schools of criticism speaks to his inclusive and nimble prose. He puts a point on ideas blunted by jargon. While the decidedly white-phallogocentric pantheon of theorists cited above might suggest a gross neglect of women and racialized theorists, this is not at all the case. One of the many virtues of this primer is to draw affinities between, say, Mikhail Bakhtin's transgressive carnivalesque and the prosaic mestizaje of Chicano cultural and queer theorist Gloria Anzaldúa. He illuminates the influence of Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialism on postcolonial theorist Frantz Fanon. He shows, too, how African Americanist Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s idea of "signifying" as an act of resistance can resonate far more powerfully among Oprah's lay audience than among the professoriate. Incidentally, as Birns notes, it was Oprah—cited almost in the same breath with Gates, Cornel West, and the diasporic critic Kwame Anthony Appiah—who almost single-handedly popularized Toni Morrison among the African American community. Theory's reception can vary in surprising ways. Thus

Julia Kristeva's impact, "liberalizing" in France and in the Francophone world, would be "radicalizing" in the Anglosphere. Received as a cultural authority, Derrida, a French-Algerian Jew, can just as easily be read as a postcolonial and diasporic figure. While a racial dynamic shapes most United States-based postcolonial writing, in Edward Said's hands it shows that W.B. Yeats was a postcolonial writer.

From Homi K. Bhabha to Barack Obama, theory has fostered hybrid "third spaces." It widened public discourse to the point where multiculturalism and heterogeneity became the new norm. When wedded to practice, theory's subversive "mimicry," in Bhabha's conception, has brought hermeneutics to the realm of lived experience. Rippling across multiple fields, theory has helped to disseminate and normalize feminist, queer, anti-racist, and anti-colonialist memes, to name a few. It is in this emancipatory project that Birns finds theory's greatest triumph. His book not only traces an arc across decades of theory after theory but also challenges the common misperception that theory is "just theory." Birns regards even university equity surveys as a coup for theory. Indeed, in my own institution as elsewhere it would have been almost inconceivable in the not-so-distant past to come across a category in an employment equity census questionnaire allowing faculty and staff to self-identify as "transgender." In deconstructing normativity and conformism since the 1950s, theory—and queer theory in particular—has paved the way for change across class, gender, and racial vectors. If theory is passé, as some think, it just might be as "a victim of its own success" (276).

Yet Birns posits that theory is an unfinished project. Theory is too often "cultic" (294), trafficking "in obscure jargon" (105). For all the success of queer theory, Birns keenly observes, the "experience of non-white and particularly non-Western gays and lesbians" is nearly invisible critically (277). By recasting homosexuality as a Western creed to be resisted, fundamentalist religious communities could reconstitute queerness as a form of neo-imperialism. Here, too, queer studies can intervene, mediating between literary theory and the "real world" of particular queer subjects worldwide. So Birns takes Hélène Cixous to task for asserting that we are all bisexual, because this renders gender a category so open-ended "as to be meaningless" (275). Postcolonialism and globalization have also underrated the staying power of nationalism and the nation. Yet these bones of contention do not undercut theory's pluralism: they typify it.

The book occasionally misfires. Birns misreads Ezra Pound's famous slogan, "make it new," as a call to "junk any idea of tradition" (Birns 181). Pound meant no such thing. Instead he strove to salvage worthwhile bits and pieces of ancient wisdom for current use, just as his slogan is itself a trans-

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lated fragment of an inscription found in an eighteenth-century BCE bathtub belonging to Shang Dynasty founder Cheng Tang. Off the mark, too, is Birns' idea that T. S. Eliot saw the Western canon as locked in "monumental invulnerability" (181). Eliot explicitly states in "Tradition and the Individual Talent" that every great new work of art alters the whole of tradition, even if slightly. While the specialist might quibble here and there, however, Birns' evenhanded book is a salutary complement to explicitly politicized "after theory" studies by Terry Eagleton and Valentine Cunningham, both of whom *Theory After Theory* engages. In contrast to Eagleton in particular, Birns ends on the rather hopeful note that "after theory, realms of possibility are still open" (319).

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